Miss Couser

We got word the hospital matron was due to arrive to inspect the ‘Nursing Home’. Living there during our nurse training, we had lots of time to fill out. Especially when in class learning the ‘ins and outs’ of medicines, treatments and nursing care. The law. All required knowledge to pass our exams. It was like school for adults with early quitting time frames. But only some weekends off.

Miss Couser, we called her ‘Touser’. A middle aged single lady who had the cosy job of ensuring us nurse pupils kept the

rules. Standing there, looking smug, her soft fat round figure was gently swaying as the matron entered the home.

“I believe some rules have been broken here,” was Mrs Flannigans’ opening words as we stood defiantly wondering ‘what was up’. On the ‘grape vine’ we had advanced knowledge of what the problem was. We were ready with our defence if the gossip was true not being allowed to go home at weeks when on training duties in the wards was soul destroying. This was 1969, the height of ‘the sixties’. Freedom, music, dancing, mini skirts, the loose morals and ‘the Beatles’.

Once leaving again, out the window of the end room, Rachel refused, always to come. She was a remorse little person. Was still suffering from the death of her brother. He was the first victim of ‘the troubles’ shot at the Shambles area of Armagh by the ‘B-Specials’ trying to disperse a rowdy crowd gathering. This was 1969.

“Thanks again ‘Rach’,”Bronagh whispered, as we slunk tiptoeing along the lawn to the waiting car. Not always sure Rachel would keep these secret rendezvous at bay. Hearing the ‘volks wagon’ van purring, our excitement rose.

These were new lads. New boyfriends we had met at a dance in Edendork. Our Keady men had no knowledge of this. Rachel would answer the hallway phone. Make the excuses we prompted her with. We hoped. Trusting her with the secret. Excitement was building as we ‘spluttered’ off in that well worn van.

Suddenly though we were stopped. Just at the crossroads not a half mile from the hospital. Tall, uniformed men with flash lights approached the window. The rifles on their shoulders a menacing threat. Being young and free, we had no worries. ‘Keep calm, play along, speak as

honest as you feel’ was the mantra. Mary noticed them. The two UDR who slunk back towards the ditch.

Driving off again we sighed as Mary spoke up. “My God,” she gasped. “Did you see those two who disappeared again into the hedge?” Those guys are supposed to be on night duty now. I saw them rostered on the ‘duty sheet’. “Gosh that explains a lot,” butted in Trisha. “Does anyone notice how some male staff seem to disappear after the first medicines of the night are given out?” “More noticeable when in the 36 bedded units of the villas,” she went on at length to say. I have asked the

night sister at times when we are struggling, “where is the male nurse?” We need more help with the ‘lifting and handling’ of some patients. Usually the reply is, “on his break,” or “needed for another ward who are short handed.”

Those villa wards had ‘nooks and cranies’. Areas divided for privacy so a busy night could pass without other staff being aware. Mysteriously in the morning at the staff hand over. The Report. They magically return.

Not all of us had been rostered in those wards yet. But her statement set us thinking. All of that chatter faded away as Patrick

turned up the music volume on the radio. Most of it was dismissed from our minds. Trish was prone to misread events. Fond of stories. Slipping back through Rachel’s window again. Usually exhausted, at two in the morning, we would quietly tip toe back to our rooms.

As Rachel slunk up beside us. The inquiry began. She looked sleepy in her wolly pink dressing gown. “When on night duty, I rarely lock my room door. Nothing in there to steal anyhow,” she blurted out. “In case of fire, the master keys hang beside the fire hydrant hose at the hallway entrance. So any room can be

entered in an emergency.” We blushed at her sudden loyalty.

“Miss Couser says there is clear evidence of muddy shoe prints outside your window,” she pointed out. “Now we shall all go and see the evidence,” matron added. Suddenly that comment seemed to be coming out of a detective’s mouth. ‘Sherlock Holmes’ came quickly to my mind.

We knew what was about to happen. Seeing Trish and Anna stifling their giggles. Mrs Flannagan marched forward. Out side with miss ‘Touser’ at her heels. “Its not funny,” she

remarked. “We are responsible for your welfare, living away from home.” “you must abide by the rules.”

Walking past the five other bedrooms, on that side of our ‘digs’, we arrived at Rachel’s window. Now open to cool the air that sunny day.

“Look,” stammered miss Couser, our miss ‘Touser’, “See the muddy prints?” “Clear evidence,” she added, smiling clearly pleased as punch.

As the matron nodded her head, she tutted, “Yes.” Just then Trish

boldly stepped forward asserting herself, “oh but look at the rest of these windows, the walls below. They are all muddy too!”

When we meet, we laugh about that day. The ingenious action of Trish. Encouraging us to make all those walls muddy. With the odd clear shoe mark for good measure. The advanced notice of her trusted secretary spilling the beans to Trish over too many vodkas. The matrons’ scheduled visit on that day.

Rachel was summoned to ‘Flannagans’ office as a follow up. She never revealed what was said. We knew she kept her

loyalty. Her quiet moods and sadness never left. She soon after give up her nursing studies. Quietly disappearing out of our lives. Her lovely older brother's murder always on her mind.

Years later, not so long ago, meeting for lunch with Trish, Mary and Bronagh. Mary would recall our nursing days. We had often staffed the same ward when qualified as staff nurses. Out of the blue she told the same tale as Trish. "It was true," she commented, "getting two wages for one night was the norm."

As I left her and Trish, we were all smiling. Smiling at our student

days of the past. Thinking both ladies couldn’t be wrong or could they. Both were known for their stories. Real or not.